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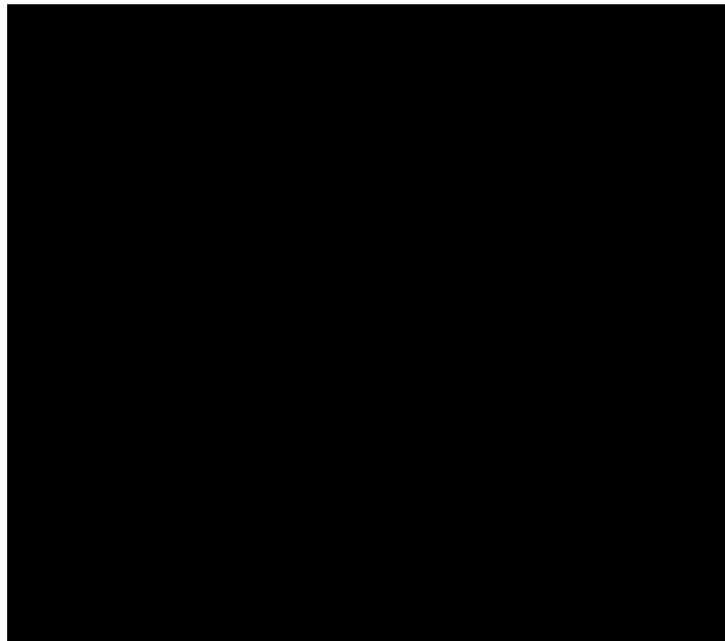
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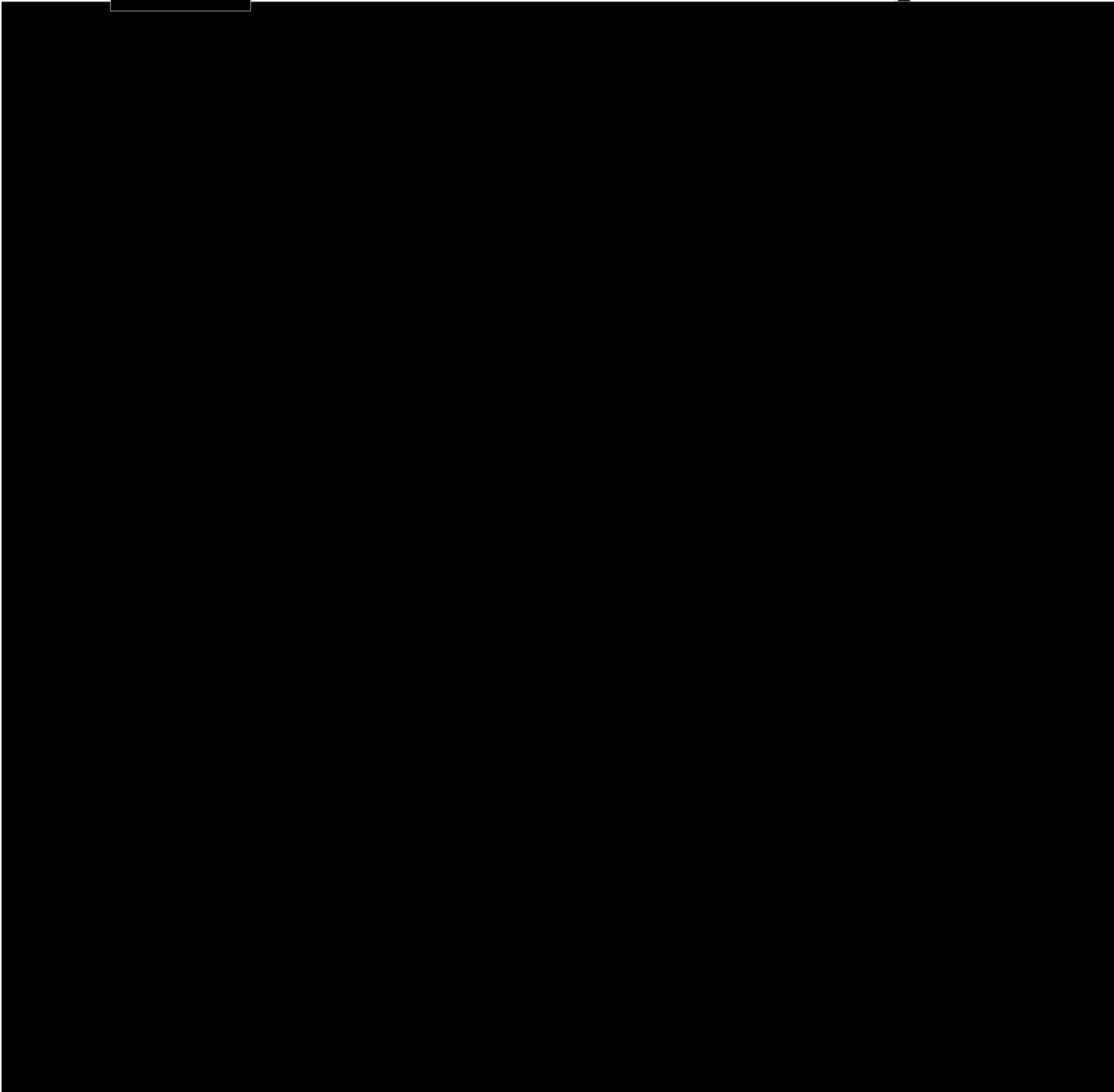
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Special Analysis

IRAN:

Preparing for Offensive

Iran's failure to launch an offensive so far this year may stem from domestic and international concerns, but its continuing military preparations suggest Tehran could initiate major ground operations over the next six weeks. The pressures facing Tehran are more likely to influence the timing and location of an offensive than to deter Iran from launching one.

Domestic political issues probably have influenced Iran's decisions about an offensive more heavily than in previous years. Recent edicts by Ayatollah Khomeini that dramatically expand the government's role in the economy and in preparation for a parliamentary election next month are causing factional infighting and diverting the attention of the same leaders who direct the war. Iranian leaders probably are concerned that an offensive will further unsettle the domestic scene, especially if it fails or results in heavy casualties.

Foreign developments have also contributed to the pressure to delay or forgo an offensive. Tehran probably is concerned that an offensive, by flouting the UN call for a cease-fire in Resolution 598, might be the final impetus the Security Council needed to pass an arms embargo resolution against Iran. The delay may also have been intended to encourage a reduction of US forces in the Gulf and to give UAE-brokered negotiations with the Gulf states a chance to work. An offensive this year is more likely than in previous years to result in serious damage to relations with the USSR, Syria, Japan, and Western Europe because of Resolution 598.

Nonetheless, postponing a major offensive presents risks to Tehran, and the military disadvantages of delaying action eventually may outweigh any advantages. With international opinion increasingly depicting US intervention in the Gulf as a victory for Washington and its regional allies, Tehran may come to believe that indefinite postponement of an offensive will create the appearance it is being checkmated in both the ground and naval wars.

Iranians in general might view inaction as a sign that the war is winding down, which might lower their willingness to respond to future mobilizations or to make sacrifices for the war. Hardliners in the regime—who often see their survival tied to success in the war—might become disgruntled and threaten regime stability if the war is not actively pursued.

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Military Preparations Continue

Iran's preparations so far would enable it to launch multiple attacks of varying sizes from the Al Faw peninsula to northern Iran. Although there were a few reports of problems with the mobilization last fall, troop strengths and training have increased through early this year. With the acquisition and deployment of more tanks, artillery, and air defense systems during the past year, Iran has greatly increased its firepower. Iran's regular army appears to be taking greater steps to prepare for offensive operations this year. Iranian forces, however, still face strong Iraqi defenses, longstanding supply problems, and potential difficulties with using new weapons effectively.

Iran's Options

The continuing military preparations suggest the regime could launch major offensive operations—with 50,000 or more soldiers—to score a significant victory during the next six weeks. A major attack against an important strategic objective such as Umm Qasr or Al Basrah would present great risks, but a victory may further strengthen support for the regime, reduce war weariness, and possibly weaken Iraq's will to resist.

Tehran might try to limit international and domestic criticism by launching attacks that could be characterized favorably regardless of their outcome. The attacks may be away from the southern front to soothe Gulf Arab nerves and possibly limit damage to relations with Moscow and Damascus. By avoiding an assault on a heavily defended strategic target, the regime would be more likely to avoid high casualties in the period leading to the parliamentary elections next month.

Tehran is almost certain to exploit militarily any initial success against the Iraqi forces if it perceives the opportunity for significant gain. Iranian leaders would expect a major victory to improve its overall position despite likely setbacks at the UN and with the Gulf Arabs.

If the offensive remains relatively limited, Tehran would still have the option to launch a larger one in the fall. Khomeini could upset the regime's calculations at any time, however, by ordering an immediate, large-scale attack on a key Iraqi target. Passage of a UN embargo, a sharp downturn in relations with the Gulf Arabs, or clashes with the US also could result in more aggressive ground operations.

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